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In regard to the teaching of English, which is replacing French as a foreign language, Viet Nam presents some unique aspects and some individual problems. More secondary school students are selecting English as their foreign language choice; English departments in the universities are expanding rapidly; the teacher shortage is increasing. One result is a large number of "improvised" secondary school teachers who teach by the grammar-translation method. Their students, upon reaching university level, have problems in comprehension, conversation, and writing. In one effort to remedy this situation, the University of Cantho selects native-speaking English teachers from various English-speaking countries and uses English as the medium of exchange, exclusively. All aspects of the program of English studies are linguistically oriented. Skills in reading and comprehension, vocabulary and writing are carried over from the spoken lessons--students learn, for example, that punctuation is a representation of the factors of stress, intonation, and juncture. Senior students receive courses in descriptive linguistics and literature. In addition to the language, the students learn about the various cultures of their English teachers. The author feels that social environment can be created around schools as an appendant to the classroom, library, and laboratory. (AMM)

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SOME ASPECTS OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN VIET NAM

by LE VAN DIEM
Vietnamese Delegation

In regard to the teaching of English as a foreign language, Viet Nam presents some unique aspects and some individual problems. With the exception of Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam the first foreign European language that was taken to the countries of South-East Asia was English. In the case of Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam the first foreign language was French. In Viet Nam, however, English is now replacing French; more of our secondary school students select English as their choice of a foreign language and consequently the English departments in our universities are rapidly expanding. This is a relatively recent development, beginning about seven years ago, and gaining momentum every year. The reasons for this upsurge in the learning of English are many and various - the pragmatic and aesthetic reasons that people in every country of the world desire to learn English with, in the case of Viet Nam, the impetus of the war and the very real necessity of communication.

Every country in the world is afflicted with a shortage of teachers, Viet Nam particularly, due to the war. The shortage of competent English teachers is extreme. To deal with the rapidly growing demand for learning English many former French teachers have become English teachers, and there are also many teachers of English whose only qualification is their ability to speak a little English.

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Thus, in our secondary schools, we have a large number of what we might call "improvised" English teachers, some unfortunately incompetent, who teach by the grammar - translation methods which modern linguistic research has shown to be inadequate. By the time the students come to us at the university they are beset by many problems which it is our duty to rectify. For many it is their first contact with teachers who are native speakers of English, many find themselves incapable of producing a page of well constructed prose, many cannot comprehend written or spoken English at a level that is expected of university students. We in the universities are cognisant of the backgrounds of English study from which these students have come and are aware of the need to reorient these students in their study of English in order to produce graduates who have thorough knowledge of the basics of English construction, the ability to converse fluently and the capability of comprehending both written and spoken English. We do not claim to produce masters of the English language in a few years but we believe that the programmes we are following are producing graduates whose basic knowledge is sound and that in whatever field they pursue in their careers, if it involves the use of the English language, they must progress rapidly until they achieve that enviable state of being a master of the English language.

For the body of this paper I should like to outline the methods of study we are using in my own university, the University of Can Tho, in order to graduate students proficient in the English language. I shall deal with the aspects of teaching spoken English, teaching of the writing of English, and the teaching of comprehension and reading.

Most teachers in our English department are native speakers of English, drawn from several countries whose native language is English. This is partly by accident and partly by design. By using teachers who do not speak Vietnamese or whose knowledge of Vietnamese is not sufficient to use that language as medium to teach at university level we have neatly eliminated the grammar - translation method of teaching. The medium of teaching in all aspects is English and the students are, as it were, "immersed" in the English language for many hours each day. At first the majority, who have come from provincial secondary schools and who have been used to Vietnamese as a medium for teaching English, undergo a difficult transition period, but with the adaptability and resiliency of youth they adjust themselves with remarkable rapidity, usually within a matter of weeks. For most students this is a challenge and for all it is a necessity.

I feel that the exclusive use of English as the medium of instruction is one of the most valuable aspects of our programme of English studies. For example, in a conversation class the technical details of English intonation may be taught as a topic; in literature and composition classes these intonations are used by the teacher while lecturing or explaining, giving the students the opportunity to accustom their ears to these intonations in continuous discourse. Just how much English is taught and how much is absorbed is very hard to gauge. A secondary consideration in the use of native speaking teachers, but an extremely vital one, is that of culture. In their teaching it is inevitable that these teachers draw on their respective cultural backgrounds and since our university is at the moment small, the teachers very quickly come to know their students personally and mix with them very frequently, either on social occasions or for the

purpose of individual instruction. During their years at the university the students unconciously absorb an understanding of the culture of the English speaking world, along with a knowledge of the English language.

I would say that all aspects of our programme of English studies at present are linguistically oriented, and courses in linguistics itself are very important part of our course of studies.

In classes in spoken English and conversation we begin with the basic essentials of the sound system of English. Here we find we have much remedial work to do. As I mentioned previously, for many students their first contact with a teacher whose native language is English, is in the university. We find that we have to deal intensively with phonetics and articulatory phonetics at first and have extensive resource to phonetic drills for the first two years of study. In the case of students who are majoring in English in the Faculty of Pedagogy and who will ultimately become teachers of English we attempt to inculcate both phonemic and subphonemic accuracy and authenticity. This is a difficult task for any teacher no matter what language his students may speak as a native language.

In our particular case it is further complicated by the fact that we have in our classes students who speak either with a North Vietnamese accent, a Central Vietnamese accent, or a South Vietnamese accent. Each group has its own particular difficulties with certain phonemes in English, conditioned by their respective accents, which are not difficulties shared in common. Generally speaking the North Vietnamese have greater

difficulties than the Central or Southern Vietnamese, both in reproducing the phonemes of English and in producing a piece of discourse, either a question, a response, or a statement, with the correct intonation. This requires the teacher of spoken English unobtrusively to give them a little more attention and practice, without of course, jeopardizing the progress of the other students. All our students experience varying degrees of difficulty with English intonation patterns. Because of the tonal nature of the Vietnamese language, where very rarely will two consecutive words be produced on the same pitch level, the students have problems when attempting to say a simple English sentence where the majority of words are produced on the same pitch level.

We have various drills to try to overcome this problem, one of the most successful being the use of a "word", or perhaps more accurately a combination of sounds which convey no meaning, such as "la", that is substituted for each word in the drill exercise. In such a case the students will not be concerned with the meaning of the structure, and so will concentrate exclusively on the intonation pattern. We also use the system of drawing a line through the written sentence, the various levels of it representing the respective pitches, and the gradual building up of a syntactic structure. Intensive drilling in our language laboratories eventually almost overcomes these problems. Probably, however, our success can be attributed largely to the models provided by our native-speaking English teachers who provide excellent models for imitation. To all our students it is a revelation to discover that structural meaning may be conveyed by intonation and juncture alone, a linguistic

factor which does not exist in Vietnamese to the extent that it does in English.

In teaching the skills of reading and comprehension the lessons in spoken English are integral. One is a carry-over to the other. The students may be taught that punctuation is a representation of the factors of stress, intonation, and juncture, albeit a very imperfect representation. Nevertheless they may learn that major punctuation points such as full stop, exclamation mark, question mark, and so on, represent certain types of juncture and a primary stress, and that various intonation patterns are attendant on these junctures. Having learnt that intonation patterns may convey structural meaning in themselves, they can learn to recognize these intonation patterns in the written language and hence grasp the implications conveyed.

In this way vocabulary is also learnt. Vocabulary is not taught as a list of words extracted from a piece of writing set as a translation exercise. Vocabulary is taught within the context of the extract being studied; the teacher explains the meaning of the word or a phrase in English and outlines any secondary connotations it may have in terms of humour, irony, culture, and so on. If it is a word that may have several different meanings according to its context, then these meanings will be explained and a context supplied. Words so learnt will be used in pattern exercises and drills in conversation classes and composition assignments, will be structured in such a way that students may employ these words or phrases they have learnt in their own writing. By thus integrating the subject matter taught in the speaking, reading, and writing of English the students

increase their facility in the use of English. In the actual writing of English we are perhaps fortunate in that we use the Roman alphabet with a few additions and omissions to represent Vietnamese. Thus we do not have to teach our students a new set of symbols although we have to stress that the symbols do not represent exactly the same sounds in Vietnamese and English.

In composition classes the material learnt in conversation and reading comprehension classes is heavily drawn upon. From selected models the students are taught the elements of English prose style in regard to pieces of narrative writing, descriptive writing, - in fact all branches of emotive and scientific writing - and the specialized types of vocabulary employed in each. Very often the subject set in a composition assignment is closely correlated to an extract studied in a reading/comprehension class. An exercise in composition we have found valuable is to give a topic and then set the students to write a piece of scientific prose, a piece of descriptive prose, and so forth, on this topic. Since the relative smallness of our classes gives the teachers the opportunity to work individually with the students, and the teachers make themselves available outside class hours, the discussion of each individual student's composition with him or her provides the teachers with the opportunity to teach English grammar and syntax. Our teaching of grammar and syntax is akin to our method of teaching vocabulary. It is not taught as a classified body of rules but instead is discussed in terms of a model extract being studied or in terms of the students' own compositions.

For our senior students we provide courses in descriptive linguistics and literature. At this stage of their English studies the students have a sufficient knowledge of the English language to be able to study both courses in some depth. For students who are going to become English teachers both courses are extremely valuable. Hopefully the principles they learn in the descriptive linguistic courses they will apply in their own teaching so that the remedial work we now have to do with students coming into the university will be eliminated. The course in literature is benificial both to their actual teaching and to the understanding of the culture of the English-speaking world which they must have if they are to teach the language adequately.

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned the difficulties we experienced in the process of having English replace French as the first foreign language, but for the course in literature a knowledge of French culture and civilization is extremely valuable. Many of our students do have this knowledge, having studied French in secondary school, or living in environments where the influence of French culture and French speech is still strong. In French therefore they have a bridge between Vietnamese culture and the culture of the English-speaking world, having already accustomed themselves to a Western culture.

I have just made the remark that, due to environment, many educated Vietnamese have continued to bear the imprint and the influence of French culture. I wonder whether we can likewise organize some kind of environment to make the teaching and the study of English more effective in our country. Our basic

assumption is that good instruction must emphasize drill and repetition, inculcation and unconscious absorption, and that in the process of learning sense apprehension and sense memory are as important as the other mental capacities. From this view, and from experience and common-sense, we believe that some social environment can be created around our schools, as an appendant to the classroom, the library, the language laboratory and the teacher's office, to help these promote the study of English language and culture.

As a substitute for a native English-speaking society, such establishments as dorms, club houses, students' unions can be created, run by native English speakers and designed to reflect some essential features of life in countries these people represent. To these places the students can come and participate in the extra-curricular activities to be organized there, and live moments of their life in conditions and ways as reminiscent as possible of conditions and ways in the country whereof they are learning the language. If the school is in a locality where there is a sufficient number of native English-speaking residents, the cooperation of these can be requested, either by asking them to participate in the social activities at the school clubs, or to have these activities held at their houses which the students are invited to join. These extra-curricular establishments and programs are not only to serve a social purpose; they will be an essential means and aspect of language and culture study, necessary accessories to formal teaching, a way to practice the theory of instruction by "immersion" to which

culture is still ultimately a thing of the mind, but which takes into account the social and the physical attendants of it as some of the means to attain its essence.

In this paper I hope I have given some small indication of the methods we are using in the teaching of English as a foreign language. We draw ideas for our teaching programmes from many sources and adapt them for conditions in Vietnam, since we know that in second language learning the difficulties can be, to a certain extent, determined by comparing the second language structure with the first. In addition we develop our own programmes, applicable only in a Vietnamese environment. Our primary concern is that the students <u>learn</u> in all aspects of their studies, and that they are capable of using and applying what they learn, particularly so in the case of the students who will become teachers of English. The teacher has always occupied a prominent and respected place in Vietnamese society. We are concerned that the teachers we produce should be of the highest calibre, and towards this end our efforts are directed.

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